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After briefly discussing the causes and meaning of laughter, the phenomenon of the comic, the value of humor, and the difference between cruelty and "mellow" humor, the article examines the role of humor in the language class. It concludes that humor, meeting the highest standards, both textual and pictorial, provides a valuable motivational technique, for it arouses student interest and helps establish a relaxed pupil-teacher relationship. (SS)

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Attitudes to Modern Language Teaching Aids

Paper read in May 1965 at the Institute of Education, Cambridge.

"Humour and Language Teaching"

This talk is to be on our "attitudes to modern language teaching aids", but I am sure you will allow me to narrow down slightly the range of my remarks. I should like, tonight, to speak to you about our attitudes to humour in language teaching, and about our awareness or lack of it, of its importance within our ML instructional media, both printed and visual materials.

I will do so in the hope that the age-old image of the teacher wielding the stick, the image of the humourless and hard pedagogue, may one day no longer be accepted. We must humanise the image of the teacher.

I shall speak about humour in the language class because I am confident that we all reject the kind of remark which indicates unwillingness to accept the fact that rigour and high standards do indeed go with interest, stimulus and the civilising smile, chuckle and laughter in class. "The young have it too easy nowadays. In my days you were thrashed until you learnt something. Why can't they learn things the hard way, as we used to?" So we read in our national press a few weeks ago!

This talk is a plea for humour, good and mellow humour carefully and yet spontaneously integrated into our full range of activities as ML teachers, for reasons which I propose to go into more fully.

Immediately upon my arrival, 18 years ago, in the home of the French family where I was to live as a student, I pinned up over my bed an enlargement of a famous SEARLE cartoon. Three fierce looking girls of St. Trinian's lying behind a machine gun, with the centre girl firing away for all she is worth, and the other two busily attending to the ammunition belts.

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From a small second floor window we see a slightly concerned Headmistress, who calls down: "Not quite so much noise please, girls." Shortly after having pinned up this deliciously outrageous trifle I could not help overhearing my landlady say to her daughter: "Tu as vu le dessin qu'il a accroché au-dessus de son lit? Il est complètement fou, lui" — I did not in the least mind that remark. Had not Searle, bless him, created a Headmistress with a lovely sense of humour? And, as the French say, c'est déjà quelque chose. But when my query "Est-ce que je pourrais prendre un bain chaque soir, madame?" met with the rejoinder "vous plaisantez, monsieur", I decided then and there that I had better keep a very careful record of French idiosyncrasies and since that day I have tried to remain aware of what Château calls "le non-sérieux dans le monde sérieux."

If sixty years ago I had proposed to speak or write on "humour in language teaching", I have no doubt at all what the reaction of a large number of colleagues would have been. I think many would have had considerable misgivings regarding the suitability of the subject. All I wish to do here is to open for you a little wider a window which has long been open to a good number of colleagues all over the world. It is important that we should make further progress in language teaching, further improve our methods where possible and I hope that what I have to say here may make a tiny contribution towards a better lesson. May I introduce the subject proper with two stories of differing humour.

The first one is an exchange between a tailor and his customer:

Combien de jambes au pantalon?

Combien de quoi?

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De jambes, jambes, pour mettre les jambes.

Je ne sais pas, vous me prenez au dépourvu. On m'en a toujours mis deux, mais si vous croyez qu'il en faut davantage

Ça dépend de vous. Ce sont des pantalons pour mettre ou pour emporter dans un paquet?

Pour mettre.

Alors nous mettrons deux jambes pour le moment. Si vous en désiriez d'autres nous serions toujours à temps d'ajouter. Notez, Gaston: deux jambes au pantalon C'est bien au pantalon que vous les voulez, n'est-ce pas?

Au pantalon, c'est évident.

Ce n'est pas évident du tout, parce que moi, si vous voulez, je peux vous les mettre au gilet.

The French would say: L'auteur (Lara) fait rire parce qu'il reste entièrement dans le domaine de l'absurde.

The humour of the second tale is, I think, no less telling:

Mr. Parker is pushing along a pram in a busy street. Inside the pram sits his little son who yells and screams without stopping. The father, under increasing strain, looks at the boy intently and says: "Quiet Edward, quiet boy, quiet Edward," and he goes on like this for a minute or two. Suddenly Mr. Parker feels a hand on his shoulder, turns round and sees a man smiling at him who says to him: "I do congratulate you on the way you are soothing your son, the way you are saying: 'quiet Edward, quiet boy', is really remarkable. I congratulate you and I know what I am talking about. I am a psychiatrist. The way you are saying: 'quiet Edward' is really wonderful." The father looks at the psychiatrist and says: "Edward? I am Edward, he is Paul."

Both these stories, I submit, would be incomprehensible to a child. They would be incomprehensible to a baby. The baby and the child could not savour the element of the unexpected and in this case the clever sally at the psychiatrist. The child would be incapable of

the laughter of demolition that I just heard from you because the baby is unfamiliar, the child is unfamiliar with the situation, and it lacks the sophistication to appreciate either of the two stories. I want to oppose the adult laughter that has just been engendered to the laughter of the baby because it is the causes of laughter and the phenomenon of the comic I want first to talk about. And I want to talk particularly about the following: To what extent the integration of the comic and the stimulation of chuckle, smile and laughter in humorous situations in a modern language class, both in text and in picture, can increase the interest, activate motivation and raise the performance level of the work both orally and in writing. That must be my aim.

The causes of laughter and the phenomenon of the comic

When next you are asked to play with and entertain a baby, I would ask you to try to do the following: *laugh* and then suddenly make a perfectly awful, a perfectly terrible face. If the baby is old enough to perceive faces and is normally equipped for the calamities of life which lie before it, as before all of us, it will also laugh. But if you make a perfectly awful, a perfectly terrible face suddenly, *without laughing*, I think that the little child will scream with fright. Conclusion: in order to laugh at something frightful and frightening the baby has to be in a playful mood. Secondly: if this perceptual effort is beyond the child, try a little practical joke. Offer the youngster something he wants and will reach to get. And when he is about to grasp the object jerk it away *smilingly*. The baby, unaware in all probability of the difference between play and tease, may react in two different ways: he may set up a yell of indignation or he may emit a long drawn out and extreme cackle of supreme delight and enjoyment as though this was a most ingenious joke.

I submit that these two orthodox ways of entertaining a little child correspond exactly to two famous definitions of the comic. Aristotle defined the comic as a defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive and he added: "The comic mask is ugly and distorted but it

does not cause pain." This is important. In other words: the comic mask as seen by Aristotle is making *terrible faces playfully*. Kant, defined the cause of laughter as the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing or, in other words and simpler, straining, reaching after something and finding it is not there. One might therefore define the comic as a pleasurable condition, accompanied by laughter of various kinds and arising in play at the very point when one would feel an unpleasantness if one were seriously concerned, seriously engaged. Of course, the borderline may be very thin indeed. And only too often we feel like laughing and crying. Think only of some of the most brilliant comedies of Molière in which he keeps the audience, frequently and movingly on the borderline of tragedy and comedy. It is this inexplicable duality of our life which Byron was referring to when he wrote: "If I laugh at anything mortal 'tis that I may not weep." And Mark Twain speaking of the human condition, said: "Each human being is pathetic. The secret source of humour itself is not joy but sorrow." And he added: "There is no humour in heaven." This brings me to the creative situation, because it is the creative situation which concerns me particularly, the creation of true comic and humorous situations both textually and pictorially.

As there are various kinds of humour, some derisive, some mellow and sympathetic and others merely whimsical, we appreciate readily that to create comedy, to conjure up the truly funny is much harder than to create serious drama or even tragedy. Why? People laugh in many different ways but they cry only in one. And what is applicable to the stage is equally applicable to the classroom. Which is what we are going to be concerned with. The fact that the complexity of humour makes such great demands on the creative processes of the humorist, the originator, makes plain to us why he, the professional humorist, objects, often dislikes the question "What do you understand by humour?" Frequently this question is put to him.

The value of humour

But we wish to discuss the value of humour.

both textual and pictorial, in the modern language course. And I think, in order to do so, we must attempt to arrive at a closer understanding not of what humour is but of what it is not, and particularly of what good humour is not. Addison in 1711 wrote in the "Spectator": "Just as true humour appears serious whilst everybody always laughs at its manifestations, false or bad humour guffaws constantly while its recipients appear serious and do not laugh at its manifestation." Lord Kames wrote in 1762 in his "Elements of Criticism": "True humour is the attribute of an author who pretends to be serious but who describes what he sees in such a way as to provoke mirth, happiness and laughter." I would add to this: the ability to laugh at ourselves is of a vital importance, and I would go further and say that not to be able to laugh at ourselves indicates immaturity of mind. There is a close relationship between not taking ourselves too seriously and evidence of a sense of humour. Let me illustrate this with something which Friedrich Leutholt wrote about life. He said: "Nimm dieses Leben nicht so ernst, gar lustig ist's im allgemeinen, je besser du es kennen lernst, je munterer wird es dir erscheinen. Kein Drama ist's im grossen Stil, wie du dir denkst, mit Schuld und Sühne, es ist ein derbes Possenspiel, gespielt auf einer Dilettantenbühne. Zwar wär's nicht halb so jämmerlich, wenn nur die Leute besser spielten, und wenn die Lustigmacher sich nicht immerdar für Helden hielten."* — This is what Friedrich Leutholt had to say. I do not say that I agree with everything that he says, but certain is that he opens for us a window and makes us ponder on certain problems which some of us would normally perhaps not ponder on. In the definitions of humour which I have given you words like guffaw, mirth, chuckle, smile and laughter figure constantly, and we are forced, in order to understand and appreciate humour, partic-

* Don't take this life of ours too seriously, — on the whole it is quite amusing, and the more closely you observe it the funnier it will seem to you. It is no drama in the grand manner, as you might think, where guilt and atonement play a key part. Rather is it a rough farce, played out on the dilettante's stage. However, this life would be far less lamentable if only its actors were better performers, and if the "jokers" did not always consider themselves heroes. (Leutholt).

ularly in the classroom, to try and battle — I use that word purposely — battle with the meaning and consider the effect of laughter. What actually is laughter, what causes it and what kinds of laughter are there, and why are certain kinds of laughter engendered under certain conditions?

The meaning of laughter

Conrad Lorenz, the Austrian anthropologist, wrote in 1954 in "So kam der Mensch auf den Hund", "Imagine a horde of primitive men, surrounded in the hostile night by a thousand unknown creatures. Suddenly an antelope breaks cover, accompanied by a loud noise of breaking branches. The men jump up nervously, lances at the ready for combat. A moment later, recognising an inoffensive and harmless animal, their initial fear gives way to an excited jabber of relief and finally to loud bursts of laughter." What we have here, this loud burst of laughter after jabberings of relief, is of course a basic kind of laughter. A sudden relief coming immediately after strained tension. Remember Kant's remarks on the cause of laughter. "The sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing." As the most frequent cause of tension is fear it would, I think, be perfectly correct to say that laughter following upon fear, translates the relief of re-established safety and security. I would call this laughter the laughter of relief or security.

André Maurois, in 1953, wrote in his "L'Homme moderne civilisé": "Le rire s'exerce contre tout ce que nous craignons, parfois même contre ce que nous admirons. Chaque peuple rit de ce qu'il craint et admire le plus."

We must therefore recognise the vitally important fact that there is no laughter without security, and we can agree with André Maurois that the laughter of threatened man is the result of his victory over fear. There is a very close relationship between a capacity for laughter and the concept of freedom.

Certain authorities see in laughter a manifestation of human superiority, but between the laughter of security and the laughter of superiority there is a very close relationship, because

security and domination are closely interlinked. Domination is the age-old means of guaranteeing a social group their safety and security, and this establishes the link between the two kinds of laughter of relief and of superiority.

Now let us move from laughter resulting from superiority or security, and let us turn to what in England we consider the best type of humour: mellow humour. But before we turn to mellow humour one word on cruelty and humour. G. K. Chesterton suggested that all laughter had its origin in some kind of cruelty, in an exaltation over the pain or the ignominy of an enemy. This fallacy must, almost certainly, be a false post hoc deduction from the fact that calamity of some sort is often the final link in a humorous chain.

But in spite of Chesterton's and Burke's remarks about our delight in the misfortunes of others, and in spite of Schadenfreude, we do *not* laugh at other people's troubles just because they are troubles, and we are not twice as pleased when they fall out of a window on the sixth floor instead of one on the third floor. There is nothing intrinsically funny in falling downstairs, and if you break your leg in doing so it does not make it funnier, *but* if you fall downstairs in the middle of *warning* your wife to be careful when she comes down the staircase, then clearly a situation has arisen where we laugh at the ridiculous, the ridicule-provoking behaviour which has brought the calamity about. The calamity is the *proof* that the behaviour is ridiculous. We laugh at a man who slips on a banana skin if we see this happen on the stage, in a film or see a visual presentation in print. If he slips in *real life* we *very rarely*, if at all, laugh, unless we are satisfied that the victim is not seriously hurt, and even then only by association. That is to say our amusement is caused not by the act of slipping but by the combination of the slipping and the behaviour that led up to it . . . the combination of cause and effect. Who would have the slightest desire to laugh *if* the man who slipped on the banana skin happened to be *blind*? . . . The ever popular practical joke is *only a joke* if the victim is the victim of his *own* credulity or greed or lack of observation or lack of caution. If the mechanism of

the joke is such that the victim cannot possibly avoid the calamity prepared for him, then this is *simple cruelty*. Escarpit informs us: "Je ne puis rire de mon angoisse que si je m'en détache, si je suis capable littéralement de m'en moquer". To this statement I should like to add: Ne nous moquons pas des maladies et des angoisses d'autrui".

Cruelty and mellow humour

As an example of how easily cruelty is mistaken for good humour the following extract from a widely used third year textbook, which I shall here render in English, will serve very well: . . . Henri informs his father in this story that he has given some money to a blind man sitting at a street corner. Father approves of this in principle but informs his son that this man is not blind at all. The boy queries this statement, whereupon his father tells him that previously one of his friends had thrown a coin into the blind man's hat. A few minutes later he came back the same way. To his great surprise the blind man told him: "The coin you just gave me is a Belgian coin". Not unnaturally the donor of the coin challenges the blind beggar, who replies: "Oh no, I am not blind at all. The real blind man, seen here every day, is my friend. I am standing in for him today" . . . To the query: "And where is the other man today?", we are told by the impostor: "He went to the cinema". The author may well have realised that this type of story could help create young cynics, irrespective of the fact that members of the group might well laugh. Therefore we find Henri's mother telling the boy that father has just told him a nasty story, which is, in fact, quite untrue. We can readily see that this type of situation could, with sensitive and reasonably intelligent classes, create interesting and delicate confrontations, which must absolutely be avoided in the meaningful "cut and thrust" between teacher and pupils, based, as it should be, on complete integrity of the teacher/learner group. Whether we deal with fast or slow learners, we must avoid, in presenting situations out of which commentary arises, exploiting the lack of judgment of pupils, and we must ask ourselves constantly as materials creators what kind of laughter we are likely to engender. When we are told by Père Castor that pictorial material

put before learners profoundly influences the development of their sensitiveness, their compassion and their judgment, and that only the very highest standards can be acceptable in such visual instructional media, then one can only add that the same criteria must apply to textual media also.

There can be no doubt whatever that mellow humour, arising out of our realisation that we are what we are, and that the only way for us to rise above this eternal human drama is by means of "le rire de bon coeur" . . . can and should be embedded within our language teaching materials. Our pupils will be grateful to us if, in a harsh and often cruel world, we remind them, not infrequently, that this "rire de bon coeur" is one of the redeeming features of man's restless striving.

It is the mellow type of humour which is projected by the gentle and benevolent drawings of men like Peynet and Duché, the famous French cartoonists. Maurois has called this kind of humour: "Cet humour bienveillant est le propre des humoristes que aident leurs semblables à supporter les petits malheurs et les grandes angoisses de la condition humaine. Souvent cet humour produit le rire triste."

What subjects does this kind of humour often deal with? For example: the ageing woman, the lonely girl, the unhappy couple. "Cet humour est comme la caresse d'une soeur hospitalière." No one could improve upon this comparison. This kind of humour completely lacks in any element of cruelty. There is of course the sardonic and the sadistic laugh. There is also the laughter which is not intended. We read in a textbook of English, used in Europe, about a seventeen year old boy and girl who go to Blackpool on a sunny Saturday in summer in order to have a swim and enjoy themselves: "She rolled over onto her back, adjusted her sunglasses and said: 'Isn't technical education in England making great strides.'" This passage was not intended to be humorous, but it is so to English boys and girls, because they find the contrast between situation and remark utterly ridiculous and very funny indeed.

Humour in the language class

I want to talk a little now about pictorial humour. Why is pictorial humour particularly important in the language class? There can be no doubt at all that pictures whether used on their own or whether tied to text will create valuable stimulus in the classroom. The association of text and picture is valuable and effective from the point of view of memorisation of language structures. The integration of the right kind of pictorial material into the modern language course can and does create a great incentive toward work, what the French call "Aiguillonnage" and the Germans "Denkreiz" which, I submit, a teacher using a textbook without pictures can much less easily obtain from his pupil. We are removed, through the use of the picture, from an element of artificiality, we are avoiding a contrived learning situation, an element of unreality. The picture, even though only static, adds towards injecting an element of life into the story, and, if properly conceived, powerfully mediates language content. If you look at the best textbooks of English, French or German, as available in all countries where languages are now taught intensively, you will notice that there has been a steady and I would even say rapid increase in the right kind of pictorial material, or at least an attempt at introducing the right kind of picture sequences closely related to the text. The pictorial humorist deliberately chooses drawings as a vehicle to express his humorous ideas. It is wrong to treat pictorial humour as a branch of art or a form solely of artistic expression. It must be judged by its humour. Therefore, and this may be an encouragement to many colleagues, the good humorous idea drawn by somebody completely unknown, any teacher in the classroom, is much to be preferred to a bad pictorial sequence drawn by a celebrated artist. Pictorial humour is quite simply a vehicle or a shorthand by which the humorous idea may be absorbed by the reader or the listener with a minimum of effort, and since pictorial humour is an aid to the modern language teacher without any doubt at all, and humorous subject matter creates added stimulus, this fact must be appreciated and must be borne in mind by all teachers of modern languages. Of course

there are difficulties. Pictorial humour's chief trouble is the tasteless drawing, and here a word must be said about the many modern language textbooks which utterly lack in humour, pictorially and textually. Today, however, a great many language teachers throughout the world are intensely aware of its importance in the classroom, and particularly in our subject where the histrionic ability of the teacher is of considerable importance. Furthermore, present developments indicate clearly that the 4-5 minute 8mm animated cartoon film available in a cassette and created for the language class may well be regarded as an important new adjunct in the armoury of language teaching tools. On the question of the bad textbook, the textbook lacking in humour, I would recommend you to read the book called "How to be Top", illustrated by Ronald Searle, one of our great cartoonists, and written by Geoffrey Willans, a former teacher. In the chapter entitled "How to be top in French" we find a biting satire of the bad modern language textbook. The whole class is back with Armand and Monsieur Dubois and all the other weeds in the French book in lesson 3. "Everyone knows that Armand is a weed and a sissy, because he wears that stupid blue victorian shirt and that silly and sissy straw hat. There is a picture of Armand and you can imagine what he looks like. In lesson 6a Armand has just entered into the *salle à manger*, from the *jardin*." Note the language and the grammar: he entered into it — *il y est entré*. "He entered into it not to pinch something to eat but to give Maman the *jolies fleurs* which he has picked. Papa is pleased — Papa est content — Papa is not worried — *il n'est pas inquiet* — as he jolly well ought to be at this base conduct. Papa is highly delighted. 'Thou art a good boy, Armand,' he says. 'This afternoon I will take thee to the zoo.' Ah, you think that papa is not so dumb as he looks, and that he will throw Armand to the lions. 'Y a-t-il des animaux dans le *jardin zoologique*? — asks Armand. 'Ah, but yes,' says Papa without losing his temper at this feeble question. 'Houpla, Houpla, I am happy — *je suis tellement content!*' Perhaps the lions are not bad enough, perhaps it will have to be the wolves — *les loups*. The wolves could no doubt do a

good job on Armand! Is it with these thoughts that Papa goes hand in hand with his son, perhaps? They pay five francs, they enter into the zoological gardens and they look around themselves — *ils regardent autour d'eux*. "How big the elephants are", observes Armand at length. Yes, and the giraffes also. The monkeys are amusing. Oh yes, *en effet*, and there is a fox. Foxes are naughty, *ils sont méchants*. You wonder if it was Noel Coward who wrote that dialogue. So nervously brilliant is it, my dear".

Although we have here an element of exaggeration the writer is perfectly within his rights to say what he says, because the caricature was until very recently not far removed from the truth.

Just as a political cartoonist can sway an entire election campaign, and just as a good caricaturist can materially help to demolish a sacred cow — as shown in the story of the psychiatrist, I believe that humour, textual and pictorial, in the modern language class, carefully integrated into the framework of the lesson, can have a tremendously beneficial, positive and valuable effect on the attitude and learning processes of the pupils, particularly during the first three years of the course. Equally the absence of an element of humour unless replaced by kindness cannot, I submit, have anything but a negative effect on the teacher-pupil relationship. I stress: unless it is replaced by kindness. But, of course, kindness and humour usually go together. It may be said that not everybody has a sense of humour. How am I to inject it into the classroom if I have not got it? A justifiable question. But this contention I cannot accept. Every one of us can be brought to chuckle or smile or laugh at something, and as humour is one of the best things in the world, it must be within the reach of everyone. Like every other sense it may be more or less developed in some people. But a sense of humour must be part, I think, of every normal individual's equipment because without it we cannot fully face the calamities of life. Can anyone object to the principle that if our charges are to learn a language they may as well learn it with a smile?

I have spoken about various facts, various aspects of humour in order to familiarise you, perhaps, with certain trends bearing on the stimulus and response problems within the pupil-teacher relationship. True good humour, I stress the word true, is based upon an attitude towards life. And our greatest humorists, to take only Rabelais or Anatole France, have taken their stand upon the same foundation. The highest wisdom to which a man may attain, is the recognition of his own folly, of his own stupidity. Whatever knowledge we may accumulate, we shall never escape from the prison house of self. Yet, why give way to despair. If we are fools, let us at least try to be merry fools, let us make the most and best of what we cannot alter, and when each of us has played out his little part, let us say with a smile as Rabelais said: "Ring down the curtain, the farce is ended." La Fontaine, I think, meant the same, although he said it a little differently when in his fable "La Mort et le Mourant" he wrote: "Je voudrais qu'à cet âge on sortît de la vie ainsi que d'un banquet, remerciant son hôte et qu'on fît son paquet." Happy is he who can thank his maker at having been able to savour the full true bitter-sweet of life for he must have been blessed with that noblest of attributes: a true sense of humour".

Humour, therefore, is an art of existence, an intellectual comforter and a profoundly civilising influence.

L'humour est une volonté et en même temps un moyen de briser le cercle des automatismes que . . . la vie en société *et* la vie tout court cristallisent autour de nous comme une protection et comme un linceul. L'homme sans humour vit de la vie des larves, sous leur enveloppe de soie, sûr d'un avenir sans durée, mi-conscient, interchangeable. L'humour fait éclater le cocon vers la vie, le progrès, le risque d'exister.

Our work is with the young, who will face life and the calamities of life. If there is a link between humour and a zest for life and knowledge then it must at all stages find its way into our work as modern language teachers.